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The Field of Cloth of Gold. Glenn Richardson.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. xii + 276 pp. + 4 color pls. \$65.

The June 1520 summit of Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France at the Field of Cloth of Gold was a splendid meeting of monarchs in the midsummer of their reigns. The event's proximate cause was the stipulation that signatories of the 1518 Treaty of London — Cardinal Wolsey's high-profile Anglo-French alliance, framed as the linchpin of a universal peace — meet personally to feast, joust, and affirm friendship. Since both monarchs were at war by 1522, the Field, like the 1518 treaty, has gone down in French and especially English historiography as a pronounced diplomatic failure — a party on a grand scale or an “epitome of . . . manners” where nothing happened, as Joycelyne Russell maintained in the Field's last large-scale treatment, in 1969.

While similar to Russell's work in source base and structure, Glenn Richardson's new study frames the Field in an altogether different light. Richardson, whose research, teaching, and public outreach has focused on Tudor-French relations, assimilates recent scholarship on material court culture, monarchical self-fashioning, and the rituals of late medieval and early modern peacemaking to interpret the event in ways meaningful to its participants, who could not have known that they would be at war within two years. The event allowed each monarch to represent the 1518 peace as an ostensible victory over the other, while making peace acceptable to their aristocracies. Moreover, Richardson argues, the 1522–25 conflict was exceptional to the longer-term 1520s to 1540s pattern of Anglo-French alliance, for which the Field provided a touchstone. The Field, he asserts, thus achieved its purpose. This was particularly the case for Henry, threatened in 1520 with political marginalization, but also for Francis, facing English invasion and Habsburg encirclement. The Field enabled each monarch to spectacularly and confidently display his capacities and competence as potential ally or enemy. It served as invitation to alliance and simultaneous warning against aggression for not only attendees, Richardson claims, but also outside observers, foremost among them Habsburg scion Charles V.

Given that Francis's chief rivalry throughout his reign was with Charles, the Field was debatably of greater importance to English monarchical representation and historiography than to French. Consequently, Richardson's secondary aim, to better balance English sources for and treatments of the Field with French, is less successful than his reframing. With the exception of financial accounts, into which Richardson delves deeply to produce a richly textured and exactingly detailed tapestry of the Field's material manifestations, the French side is not as evenly documented as the English. This leads Richardson to occasionally pad his evidence with trivia or speculative phrases such as “would have” and “one could imagine.” The specialist also misses a critical discussion of sources' production, transmission, and reception. Like his predecessors, Richardson relies heavily on English calendars

of state papers, account books, French physician Jacques Dubois's 1521 pamphlet, Edward Hall's 1542 English narrative, and images — two 1540s paintings from Hampton Court Palace and four 1530s bas-reliefs in Rouen — previously treated as testimonial but here correctly recognized as representations. (It is unfortunate that references to these images are not consistent with illustrations' captions.) To these sources he adds new, primarily French materials drawn from departmental and municipal archives, albeit without substantially altering the broader narrative. Richardson's editors may have chosen to reduce historiographical argument and relegate source discussions to the annotated bibliography to make the work more appealing to a broader, chiefly English, nonspecialist audience. This does a disservice to Richardson's scholarship.

While Richardson devotes more attention than his predecessors to the indispensable Habsburg context, the work would have benefited throughout from a broader European perspective. Readers are repeatedly told, for example, that news of the Field was disseminated across Europe in diplomatic missives and printed accounts, but hear too little about foreign reactions to support expansive claims of the event's pan-European significance. Scholars might therefore dispute that "there has never been anything in the history of Europe since that quite equals it" (ix).

In general, however, Richardson's interpretation of the Field within the context of court culture and monarchical self-fashioning lends his account greater analytical rigor than preceding narratives, and establishes a foundation for comparison with other contemporary summits. Though specialists may not find Richardson's historiographical and source discussions entirely satisfying, his reframing of the Field better situates it in recent, broader understandings of early modern political culture and diplomatic relations. As such it offers both lay and specialist readers a convincing revision of existing historiography on this celebrated event.

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